

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 4052

EO 11652: GDS

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SUBJ: LEFTISTS LOSE IN CHIRIQUI

SUMMARY. A SEEMINGLY INSIGNIFICANT STRIKE BY CONSERVATIVE STUDENTS WHICH ERUPTED ON JULY 18 IN DAVID, CHIRIQUI PROVINCE, STRIPPED THE COVER OFF A FUED BETWEEN CONSERVATIVE AND LEFTIST POLITICAL FORCES IN CHIRIQUI. TORRIJOS INTERVENED BY SENDING LT. COL. MANUEL NORIEGA TO DEAL WITH THE SITUATION. ALTHOUGH IT APPEARS TORRIJOS SENT NORIEGA TO DAVID WITH INTENT OF INVESTIGATING AND QUASHING "OLIGARCHIST" OPPOSITION TO REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT, HE FOUND SITUATION SO BAD THAT TORRJOS OUSTED COMMUNIST GOVENOR ORNEL URRIOLA AND HIS ENTIRE CABINET. END SUMMARY.

1. CONSERVATIVE, INDEPENDENT AND RELATIVELY WEALTHY, CHIRIQUI PROVINCE HAS BEEN A POTENTIAL TROUBLE SPOT FOR TORRIJOS' REVOLUTION. LOCAL OLIGARCHY OF LANDOWNERS AND BUSINESSMEN DURING PAST FOUR YEARS HAVE NOT HIDDEN THEIR UNHAPPINESS WITH CERTAIN ASPECTS OF GOP POLICY AND ESPECIALLY WITH LOCAL OFFICIALS. CHIRIQUI ALSO HAS RELATIVELY WEALTHY REGIONAL COMMUNIST PARTY APPARATUS. SINCE DECEMBER 1971 APPOINTED GOVERNORHAS BEEN ORNEL URRIOLA, MEMBER OF COMMUNIST PDP. URRIOLA HAS BEEN INEPT, BUT A WORRY AND
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IRRITANT TO DOMINANT TRADITIONAL POLITICAL FORCES IN CHIRIQUI.

2. A SERIES OF EVENTS COMBINED TO BUILD PRESSURE TO BREAKING POINT IN RECENT WEEKS. AMONG THESE WERE ACTIVITIES OF LOCAL CHAPTER OF COMMUNIST-DOMINATED FEDERACION DE ESTUDIANTES DE PANAMA (FEP) WORKING TOGETHER WITH GOVERNOR URRIOLA, THE FEP-SPONSORED DAVID YOUTH FESTIVAL, PREPARATIONS FOR 26 OF JULY CELEBRATIONS OF ANNIVERSARY OF CUBAN REVOLUTION, LECTURES BY VISITING CUBANS IN SCHOOLS, AND AN ABORTIVE ATTEMPT TO PLACE A CUBAN TECHNICIAN IN A COOPERATIVE.

3. SPARK THAT IGNITED THE STUDENT STRIKE ON JULY 18 WAS THE OUSTER OF BRICEIDA MIRANDA DE TRAVIESO, FROM HER POSITION AS PRINCIPAL OF FRANCISCO MORAZAN HIGH SCHOOL. SHE HAD WITH SUCCESS COUNSELED STUDENTS TO BOYCOTT FEP-SPONSORED YOUTH FESTIVAL IN JUNE AND WAS OPPOSED TO 26 OF JULY CELEBRATIONS. LEFTISTS SUCCEEDED IN HAVING HER REMOVED, PROVOKING A STRIKE BY CONSERVATIVE STUDENTS. IMMEDIATELY, PARENTS, SOME EDUCATORS AND CLERGYMEN, AND, PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANT, THE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE OF CHIRIQUI PROVINCE (CCCP) GAVE SUPPORT TO STUDENTS. STRIKING STUDENTS DEMANDED REINSTATEMENT OF MRS. DE TRAVIESO IN HER JOB, OUSTER OF GOVERNOR URRIOLA AND CANCELLATION OF JULY 26 FESTIVITIES.

4. TORRIJOS RESPONDED BY SENDING NATIONAL GUARD G-2 LT. COL. MANUEL NORIEGA AND SOCIAL SECURITY DIRECTOR JORGE ABADIA (BOTH CHIRICANOS) TO INVESTIGATE, APPARENTLY WITH OBJECTIVE OF QUASHING ANTI-REVOLUTIONARY FORCES. THEY HAD MEETINGS WITH CONCERNED GROUPS INCLUDING SOME REPORTEDLY VERY HEATED MEETINGS WITH THE CCCP. LOCAL ANTIPATHY AGAINST GOVERNOR URRIOLA WAS SO STRONG AND EVIDENCE OF MAL-ADMINISTRATION SO EVIDENT, THAT TORRIJOS DECIDED TO CLEAN HOUSE. URRIOLA WAS SENT "ON VACATION", AND NORIEGA SERVED AS ACTING GOVERNOR FROM JULY 23 TO JULY 30. STUDENTS ISSUED A COMMUNIQUE WHICH WAS PUBLISHED IN PANAMA CITY NEWSPAPERS SAYING THAT ON BASIS OF PROMISE FROM NORIEGA AND ABADIA THAT PROBLEMS WOULD BE RESOLVED WITHIN ONE WEEK, THEY WERE RETURNING TO CLASSES.

5. ON JULY 27 TORRIJOS MET WITH CORREGIMIENTO REPRESENTATIVES FROM CHIRIQUI AND TOLD THEM HE WOULD COMPLETELY RESTRUCTURE THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT. HE ADMITTED ERROR IN HIS APPOINTMENT
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OF PREVIOUS GOVERNMENT, BUT ALSO MADE OBLIQUE CRITICISM OF CONSERVATIVE FACTION. MEANWHILE, MRS. DE TRAVIESO HAS BEEN REINSTATED TO HER JOB AS PRINCIPAL, THE 26 OF JULY CELEBRATIONS CANCELLED, AND GOVERNOR URRIOLA WAS OUT. THE STRIKERS AND CCCP HAD ACHIEVED THEIR MAIN OBJECTIVES.

6. APPOINTMENT OF NEW GOVERNOR, ARNULFO "TOTI" BOUTET, AND ENTIRE NEW CABINET WAS ANNOUNCED JULY 31. INTELLIGENCE SOURCE

INDICATES BOUTET IS "DEMOCRATIC" SUPPORTER OF REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT AND A FRIEND OF NORIEGA.

7. PRESS COVERAGE OF EVENTS IN CHIRIQUI INITIALLY DENOUNCED THEM AS ANTI-REVOLUTIONARY, THEN COMMENTARY STOPPED AND ONLY SELECTED AND LIMITED NEWS REPORTS TRICKLED OUT. FINALLY AFTER TORRIJOS'S STATEMENT JULY 27, WHICH WAS PUBLISHED JULY 29, PAPERS HAVE DISCUSSED NEED FOR ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGE AND HAILED CHANGES AS "STRENGTHENING REVOLUTION".

8. COMMENT. CONSERVATIVE FORCES IN CHIRIQUI APPEAR TO HAVE ACCOMPLISHED THEIR IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVES. WHILE TORRIJOS' FIRST IMPULSE MAY HAVE BEEN TO DEFEND THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT, WHEN HE SAW HOW STRONG LOCAL ANTIPATHY FOR URRIOLA WAS, THAT CONSERVATIVES IN CHIRIQUI WERE GETTING SUPPORT FROM CHAMBER OF COMMERCE IN PANAMA CITY, AND THAT URRIOLA WAS INCOMPETENT AS WELL AS BEING A LEFTIST, TORRIJOS APPEARS TO HAVE DECIDED HIS ONLY VIABLE OPTION WAS TO CLEAN HOUSE IN CHIRIQUI. HE MAY HAVE FEARED THAT OPPOSITION WOULD SPREAD. WHETHER THESE DEVELOPMENTS HAVE SIGNIFICANCE ELSEWHERE OR WILL ALTER TORRIJOS' PENCHANT FOR TOLERATING COMMUNISTS, REMAINS TO BE SEEN. AIRGRAM FOLLOWS.

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